

Title Guarantee and Trust Building  
401 West Fifth Street  
Los Angeles  
Los Angeles County  
California

HABS No. CA-2152

HABS  
CAL,  
19-LOSAN,  
72-

PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20243

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
TITLE GUARANTEE AND TRUST BUILDING

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1. Location: 401 West Fifth Street, Los Angeles, Ca. 90013.
2. Present Owner: SRS Associates
3. Present Use: Office Building
4. Present Occupant: Largely vacant. There is a Thrifty drugstore at ground level and a few professional offices upstairs.
5. Significance: Designed by the prominent architectural firm of John and Donald Parkinson, Title Guarantee is one of the better examples of the zig zag style in Los Angeles. It is utilitarian office structure built to serve the needs of the expanding business community of the 1920's. Although exterior architectural detail is minimized, the massing of the tower is a good example of how to combine Gothic and moderne forms successfully.

The treatment of the lobby, although small in size, indicates sensitivity to the history of the area. The walls are decorated with a set of six paintings by Hugo Ballin. The first panel shows a prehistoric scene in the Brea Pits; the second depicts life in the Spanish and Mexican period; the third shows the signing of the Treaty of Cahuenga; the fourth, Lieutenant Ord and his survey; the fifth the coming of the railroad; and the sixth shows the City of Los Angeles during construction of the Title Guarantee Building.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1930 (City of Los Angeles, building permits)
2. Architects: John and Donald Parkinson

John Parkinson (1861-1935) - Parkinson was born in England. After unsuccessfully attempting to establish an architectural office there he moved to Napa, California in 1885.

From 1890 to 1894 he practiced in Seattle and in 1894 he moved his office to Los Angeles. One of first important commissions was the Homer Laughlin Building (now Grand Central Market).

In 1905 he formed a partnership with Edwin Bergstrom. This firm designed numerous important structures in Los Angeles, including the original California Club, the Alexandria Hotel, the Citizens National Bank Building, the Metropolitan Building, and the Bullocks Broadway.

The partnership with Bergstrom was ended in 1915. After this John Parkinson continued practice with his son Donald. During this final period in his career his most important works were the Title Guarantee, Title Insurance Building and a collaboration on the Los Angeles City Hall.

The last major work he helped design was The Los Angeles Union Station. Parkinson was one of the most important architects in Los Angeles during his lifetime. He designed or helped to design more major buildings than any other architect in the city. His work shows that he was familiar with a variety of architectural styles, and that the value of this was recognized by businessmen and developers throughout Southern California.

Donald Parkinson (1895-1945) - Donald was the son of John Parkinson. He studied at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and returned to Los Angeles after graduation to work in his father's office.

In 1920 he began practice under the firm name of John and Donald Parkinson. The firm designed a number of prominent buildings. Independently, Donald Parkinson designed such structures as the Lockheed Air Center.

### 3. Original and Subsequent Owners:

- 1930 Owner at construction: Title Guarantee and Trust Co.
- 1943 Deed No. 37, recorded December 16, 1943 in Book 20469, page 391  
Title Insurance and Trust Company (successor by merger to Title Guarantee and Trust Co.) to Equitable Life Assurance Society of the United States
- 1965 Deed No. 1160 dated January 20, 1965  
Equitable Life Assurance Society to Brea Company

1966 Deed No. 3744 recorded April, 1966  
Brea Company to Thrifty Realty Company  
(This is a re-recording of Deed No.  
3453, recorded June 1, 1965 - Brea  
Company to Thrifty Realty Co.)

1978 Deed 78-1407522 recorded December 20, 1978  
Thrifty Realty Co. to SRS Associates

4. Builder: P. J. Walker
5. Original Plans and Construction: Not located
6. Alterations and additions: There has been some  
minor alteration of the street level facade;  
otherwise the building is intact.

B. Historical Context: Title Guarantee was built on  
the site of the old California Club. It was erected  
at a cost of over \$1,250,000. It was a symbol of the  
modern ideal in Los Angeles, both architecturally and  
financially. Its location on Pershing Square was part  
of and helped to solidify the shift of the business  
community to that portion of downtown. With 220 rooms  
it was a significant and very visible addition to the  
prime office space of the period.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural Character: Title Guarantee is built in a rectangular plan and is designed in the Zig Zag Moderne style. The building is constructed in an irregular, stepped back manner, ranging to fourteen stories in height. The set back is used to build up in proportioned masses to the roof. This, in conjunction with the flying buttresses, adds to the grade and symmetry of the tower and assists in carrying the sense of verticality to the highest point of the structure. The simplicity of detail adds greatly to the graceful lines and massing of the building.

The building, with the exception of the street level frontage is unaltered.

2. Condition of Fabric: good

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all Dimensions: The building frontage is 120', and the depth is 86'.
2. Foundations: The building foundations are of reinforced concrete.
3. Walls: The building has four separate wall features of 12" brick construction with terra cotta facing. The first feature consists of a corner curved element with three window bays separated by vertical ribs. The second and third features consist of the east and south elevations which are on Hill and Fifth Streets. The rhythm of the wall surface is accented by one three window bay and adjacent two window bays. The flat wall surface is again articulated by vertical ribs. The fourth element consists of a corner set-back tower that is articulated by buttresses and applied ornamentation.
4. Structural System, Framing: The building is of fire-proof construction with a brick, tile and reinforced concrete on a steel frame.
5. Porches, Stoops, Balconies, Bulkheads: The building has two balconies located above the lower story and set into the three window bays. The balconies are decorative with applied terra cotta ornamentation. Flying buttresses flank the corner tower.

6. Chimneys: none

7. Openings:

- a. Doorways and Doors: The main commercial entrance is located on a corner axis at Hill and Fifth Streets. The doorway configuration is flat and the doors are of metal construction. The office entrance is located on Fifth Street and is offset to the west. Above the entrance there is a bas-relief panel. The doorway configuration is flat and the door is of metal construction.
- b. Windows and Shutters: All windows are flat in configuration and are of the sash type. The windows are arranged in one, two and three bay patterns.

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, Covering: The roof is of irregular stepped back configuration with a composite covering.
- b. Cornice, Eaves: The building has a decorative applied cornice above the eleventh story. The cornice consists of terra cotta panels set between vertical ribs.
- c. Dormer, Cupolas, Towers: The building has a fourteen story tower with applied decoration and flying buttress. The tower is a highly visible architectural feature of the surrounding environment.

C. Description of the Interior: Since this submission refers only to exterior recordation of the structure, only a brief description of interior details is included.

The lower story is largely occupied by a drug store. Office space is above. The walls of the lobby are decorated by a set of six paintings by Hugo Ballin, a distinguished artist. The first panel shows a prehistoric scene in the Brea Pits; the second depicts life in the Spanish and Mexican period; the third shows the signing of the Treaty of Cahuenga; the fourth, Lieutenant Ord and his survey; the fifth, the coming of the railroad, and sixth and final panel shows the City of Los Angeles during the construction of the Title Guarantee Building.

D. Site:

- 1. General Setting and Orientation: Title Guarantee is located at the northwest corner of the intersection of

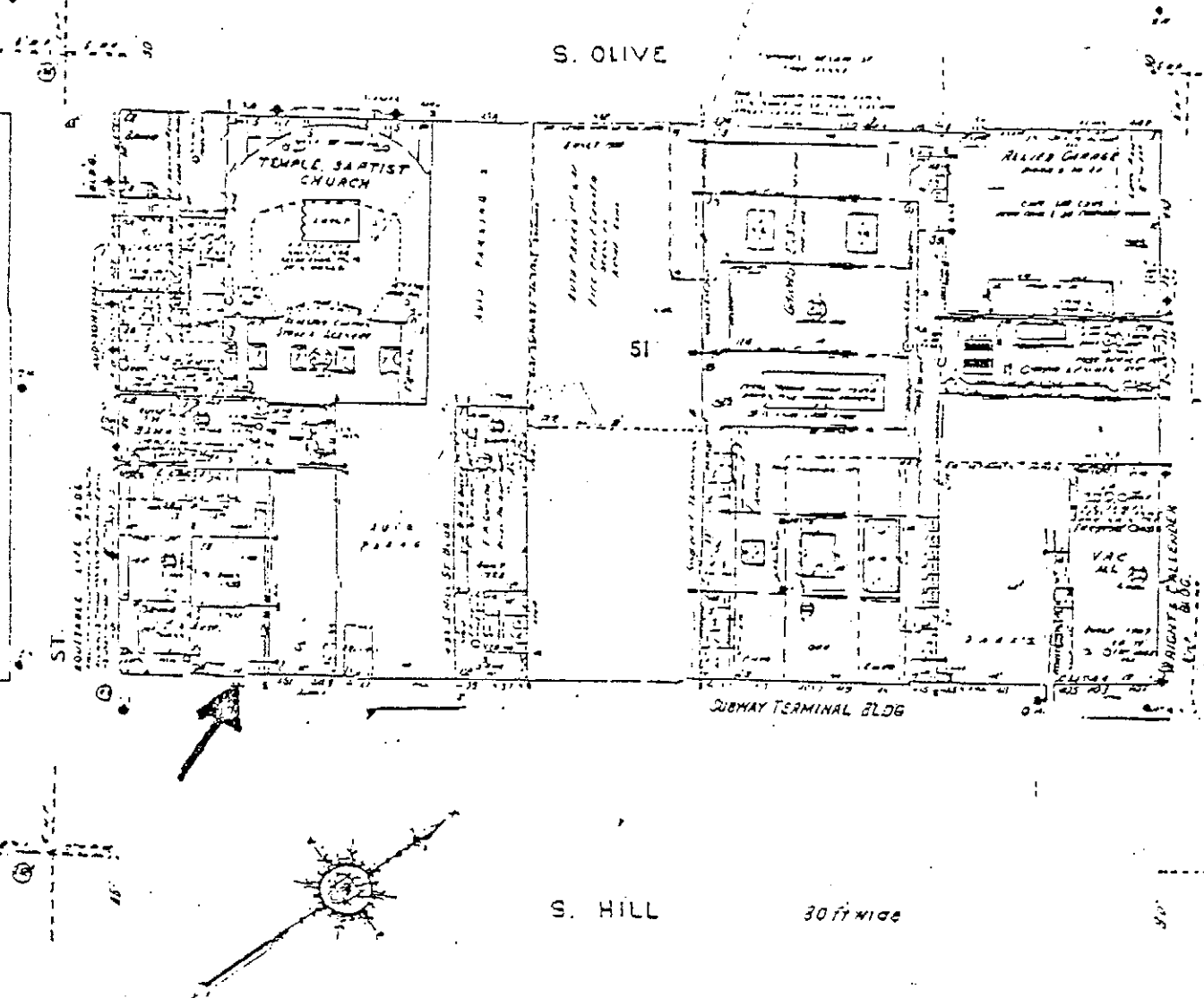
Fifth and Hill Streets. It is a contributing feature of the Pershing Square environment, and is one of the most prominent aspects of the Pershing Square complex. Its stepped and set back design with corner tower is visible throughout the surrounding area. The building is oriented on a corner or offset axis from the intersection of Hill and Fifth Streets.

2. Historic Landscape Design: Pershing Square is one of the most prominent landscape elements in downtown Los Angeles. The landscape features of the Square have been considerably altered. However, the open space and time contextual relation of the buildings which surround it is relatively unaltered.
3. Outbuildings: none

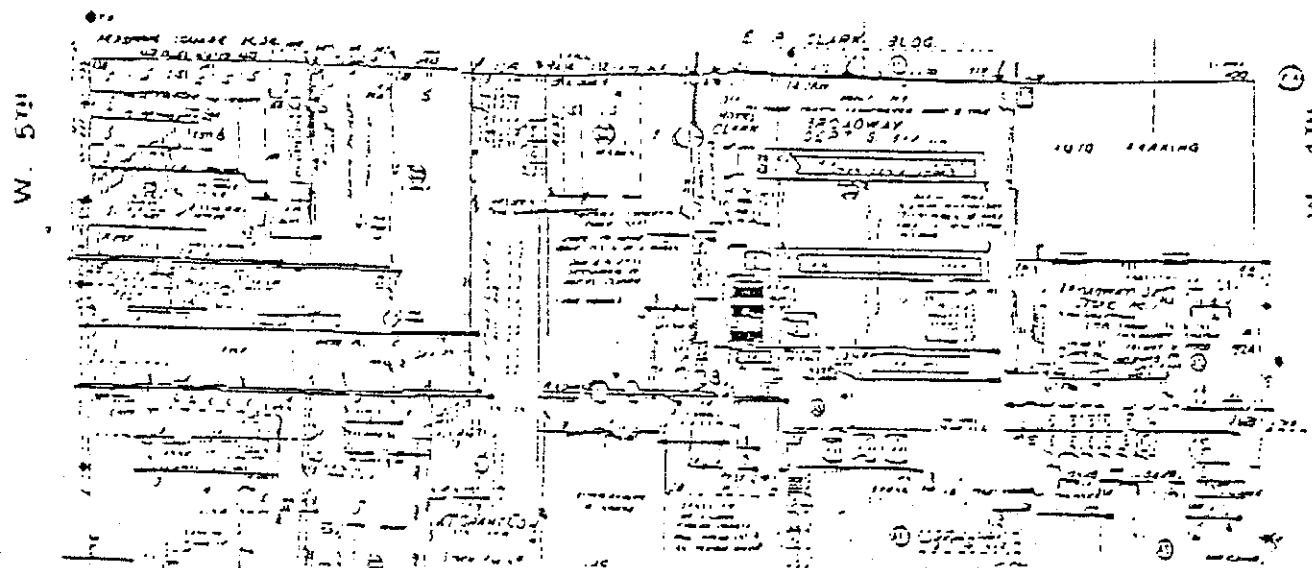
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PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Bibliography

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

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People Mover Authority  
October, 1980

#### PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

The Los Angeles Downtown People Mover Project, supported by a demonstration grant from the Urban Mass Transportation Administration, is proposing to build an automated, grade-separated transit system in downtown Los Angeles.

A portion of the route as proposed would run along the west side of Hill Street in front of the Title Guarantee and Trust Building., approximately 23 to 30 feet above the level of the sidewalk. Locating the DPM in front of the building will not require alterations to the structure, but will create a new visual element in front of the structure.